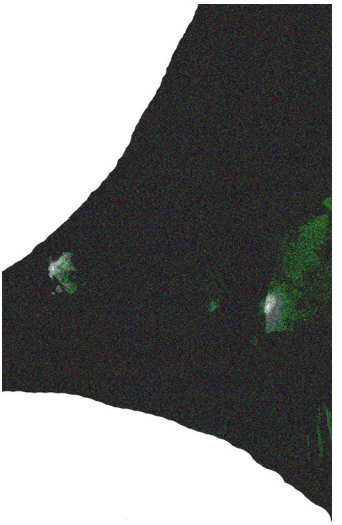
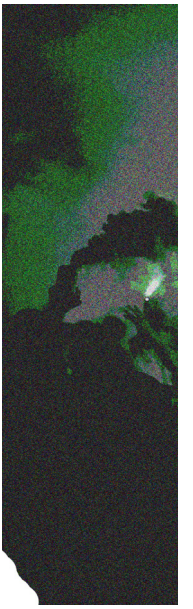
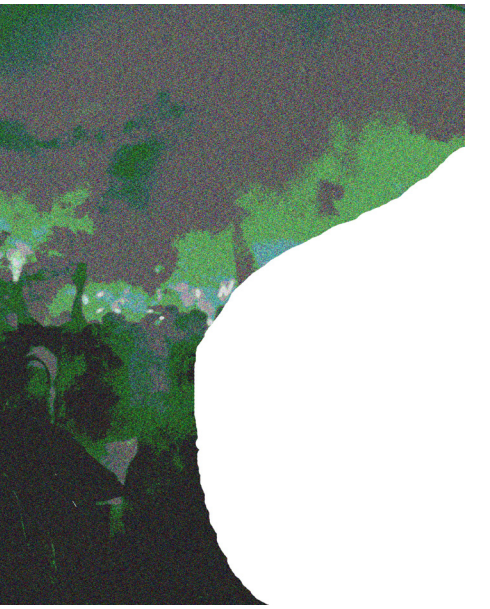
FROM THE PANDEMIC TO AN UNKNOWABLE FUTURE.

From the occupied territory of so-called Australia.
Stolen land, never ceded.







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”The noise of excited voices could be heard, the streets must be full of people, the crowd shouting just three words, I can see, said those who had already recovered their eyesight and those who were just starting to see, I can see, I can see, the story in which people said, I am blind, truly appears to belong to another world.”

- ***Blindness*** **by Jose Saramago**

Part 1: Finding each other.

I want you to describe for me the scene when the pandemic passed and social distancing ended. The one where we poured out from the cocoons we'd harboured within over these long months and into each others arms. Homes with doors opened to the streets and into neighbouring houses, creating a chain of encounters and dancefloors – the greatest party of all. Was it the block party to end all block parties, an after-the-revolution style celebration like Run the Jewels depict? Or was it more a stunned exuberance as Saramago describes? I'm sure that, just as importantly, there were quieter moments of coming together – moments of closeness with dear friends, of sharing meals again, of enjoying the sun and outdoors in company. How did we create the necessary spaces for grieving and reflection?

In *After the Quarantine, the Flood*, Natasha Lennard considers the porousness of our bodies and lives and asks: "If it is because we see our potential for interconnected-ness that we stay home, what will we do with that same potential, in plain sight now, when this virus has peaked and passed? Will we remember to fixate... on the sites where we risk finding each other and spreading something together". These words perceive the potential best from us – where the experience of isolation becomes an overflowing, rebellious sentiment that brings us back together and into new forms of relating to each other and to the spaces we occupy. I want to know if the impulse after isolation was to really find each other.

Having given so much effort to locating the best tech platforms to stay connected – and grudgingly (or not so grudgingly) appreciating their existence – was there then a shedding of our digital second skins, a collective recognition of the paucity of the connections on offer, of the hollow performativity upholding that world? And similarly, in finally being able to step out of this responsibility to be distant, was there a sense of joyful liberation that would not be constrained again by the restrictions of capital, business and governments? Did we simply refuse to return to work in such ways that would ensure the order of things could be maintained/ restored?

I guess that you're probably already thinking that I've got this all wrong. Maybe you feel sorry for the extent that I've mis-read the situation and the consequences. You might have to tell me that the medical nature of the virus allowed no movie-scripted scene as a finality. That the contagion could not be eradicated entirely and instead became endemic – circulating through the populations of the world in peaks and troughs. You might point out that this fact of the virus exacerbated the fear and suspicion that is being expressed now, opening the door to more reactionary impulses and authoritarian solutions. I'm not naïve. I'm just trying to hold space for so many potential outcomes, to accept not-knowing and be ok with that.

In truth, joyous and hopeful imaginings currently occupy my thoughts far less than

bleaker scenes. These aren't overblown projections of total collapse or of mass deaths – they don't need to be exaggerated because we currently live in a time where we can see video of mass graves being dug in New York for the homeless and poor who can't afford funerals. And the numbers of dead are already 'mass' and continues to grow. I won't ask you for the figures in your time yet. In any case, I already feel how little numbers mean, because the numbers are obscene, yet they stand for so little. It makes me think of Camus' description in *The Plague* – a novel for now like no other – of how "no one in the town knew how many people died every week in ordinary times... so in a sense the public had no point of comparison".

Part II: Techniques of control and the gradual acceptance of authoritarianism.

Had you read *The Plague* before all this happened or did you choose to read it at some point during? There's a certain feeling of unease in reading fiction that applies to something so real. It resonates now because of how precisely Camus details "those shared feelings, like separation or fear", of the everyday under quarantine. He interweaves the materiality of life in a pandemic with the sense of abstraction that occurs at the same time – those numbers that have no real meaning, the invisibility of that which confines us, the distortion of time spent in isolation.

The Plague is often considered an allegory for the rise of fascism (Nazism specifically) and there's plenty of reasons why understanding Camus in this way makes sense. However, I'm not sure that in this time of pandemic there's much use in attributing political systems upon the virus, no matter how virulent it is, no matter how many people it has killed by your time. I think that it makes less sense to see the virus as fascism itself, then to see how the fear of contagion creates authoritarian tendencies.

In a recent article, Matthew Sharpe captures some of what is most relevant about *The Plague* now, describing how the 'abstraction' that Camus refers to is in "all those impersonal rules and processes which can make human beings statistics to be treated by governments with all the inhumanity characterising epidemics". Camus doesn't just point to the de-humanising control of governmental responses to the pandemic, he also describes how "the townspeople had adapted, they had come to heel". It is the correlation of these factors that makes me most hesitant to ask about how your time looks.

I write in a moment where there is increasing tension between the rush to return to 'normality' in a desperate attempt to kick-start the economy and those who think it is too soon for governments to ease the lockdown. Many are caught in between, wanting no part in being pawns for the prioritisation of capital over public health nor interested

in handing governments and institutions further control to limit our lives. In any case, both positions accept techniques of surveillance and control implemented by the state as imperative. We have already seen increased policing, the outlawing of protest and the government's bribe that restrictions can ease if we accept the contact-tracing app. We've also seen how easily national borders could be sealed off. In this colonial, racist country, it is particularly terrifying to imagine how the state's control on movement will be tailored to find the conjunction of capital's demand for cheap labour and the paranoia of a racist population.

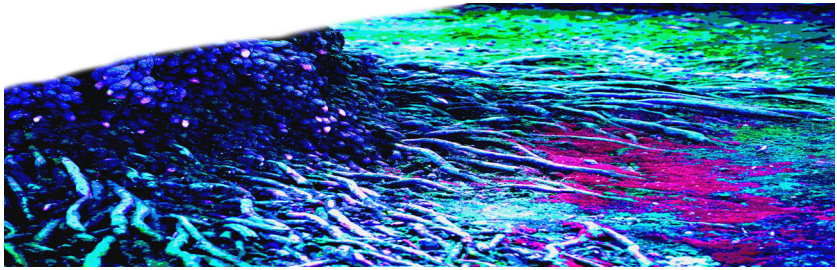
We fail to understand that the power of the state and capital is no longer simply authoritarian and fascistic in those moments where it is most visibly brutal. Instead, its power is affirmed as it corrals diverse forms of knowledge and expertise under its umbrella into a totalising regime of control. In *Terror Incognita*, Crimethinc argue that "state power is a cartographic project", that its "pursuit of total knowledge through mapping extends to the populations of states as well as their territories". This process is normalised even in 'ordinary' times, but it is given greatest impetus in such extraordinary times as this pandemic constitutes. It becomes an opportunity for governments to increase their capacity for surveillance, as well as introducing punitive measures of control against those who refuse to be so easily contained.

These arguments aren't new to us now. The downhill momentum of seemingly exceptional circumstances – climate change, economic crisis, bushfires, pandemic – has led to the rolling out of unceasing exceptional measures. Even as every situation demands something entirely different, the hegemonic politics of today means the power of the state becomes almost impossible to think beyond. In their essay, *Catastrophism, Disaster Management and Sustainable Submission*, Rene Riesel and Jaime Semprun describe how:

> "State catastrophism is an openly avowed endless propaganda campaign in favour of planned survival; that is, for a version that is managed in a more authoritarian manner than the one that currently exists. Ultimately, after so much data is evaluated and so many deadlines are estimated, its experts have only one thing to say: that the immensity of what is at stake (of the 'challenges') and the urgency of the measures that must be adopted nullify the idea that the burden of social coercion could be lightened, so natural has it become."

Directly related to tendencies that are present in responses to climate change, the pandemic has given new impetus to social coercion. Crimethinc call this "liberal consent", where "we all have to put up with this system, so the logic goes, whether we choose it or not, because any violation would put us all at risk". The long-game existential crisis of climate change – the dawning realisation of comfortable (white) environmentalists that the pleasant lives they had always assumed were their 'right', would instead be beset by constant crisis – is now intensified. So it becomes an accepted political position

to harangue with an insistent morality that dismisses and excludes all other social antagonisms, and instead seeks to cede our capacity to act, to the state's capacity to control.



Part III: Liberal morality and safety.

My question ends up being, what if the most effective resolution to the pandemic (or any crisis) is the most technocratic, authoritarian one? Does liberal moralism require us to be good with that? Even if, with the benefit of hindsight, you answer 'yes' to the first question, I hope you understand that I will keep answering 'no'.

Mostly, I'm scared of how attempts to be collectively responsible to each other became conflated with, and opened the door to a righteous and shaming morality. How an insistence on safety as a moral imperative that must precede all others, grows into a suspicious monster that seeks security in the cold embrace of the state. Even though she wrote this for a different context, it's worth repeating Jackie Wang's point in *Against Innocence* that "removing all elements of risk and danger reinforces a politics of reformism that just reproduces the existing social order". She was writing from the USA about how the politics of innocence and safety are foundational to anti-black violence, especially as perpetrated by the state through racialised policing and incarceration.

The idea of safety as a neutral condition that can be rationally produced and regulated, de-contextualises it from histories of colonisation, exploitation and white supremacy. This version of safety is at play right now. The proliferation of borders – cordoning off homes, neighbourhoods, cities, regions and countries – involves a corollary suspicion of the lurking (typically not-white) outsider bringing disease and crime. Even while accepting the necessity of certain boundaries against the contagion, it is already visible how the policing of these mobilises nationalist sentiments, becoming a reason for racist exclusion and anti-immigrant dog whistles in an attempt to re-assert a 'safe', white nation-space. I don't know if it's going to be possible to switch this off now that the morality of safety has been invoked and I can only hope that you might tell me otherwise.

Is it possible to accept the necessity of quarantine and being distant without affirming the repressive apparatus of the state? We could start by not falling into judgemental prescriptions of 'good' and 'bad' predicated on how people are able to isolate. Such tales nearly always reduce the complexity of the world into conservative appeals to a punitive authority. As Emiliano Teran Mantovani writes of ongoing quarantine, "for the billions of precarious people in the world, it is immediately unfeasible. For others, it represents a paralysis of yearnings, sociabilities, discontents, projects". There are material reasons. There are also reasons relating to the multitude of desires, struggles and fears that circulate, sometimes aligning, sometimes clashing. These throw shade upon all-encompassing assertions of safety and strain against the rationalising order of liberal governance.

I think we can avoid the cartoon-ish, anti-intellectualism of conspiracy theorists and RWNJs at the same time as rejecting the simplistic moralism inherent in 'trust the experts'. We can take on and respect the knowledge of health workers and disease control specialists while also recognising that once we move into the terrain of social solutions to this pandemic the scope broadens so much that it includes aspects which such expertise cannot account for. Alongside this we know that the experts still have to practice their knowledge within the hegemony of capitalism, white supremacy and the state. Their imagination of what's possible is limited by these confines and by the belief that people left to their own devices are not to be trusted and need government intervention.

This is liberalism in full effect, under the guise of 'the social good' and the protection of individual rights, it demands increasing surveillance and regulation of our lives. It exists in direct conflict with the potential of interconnected-ness that Lennard conjures, a top-down managerial authoritarianism rather than a diffuse collectivity that seeks diverse ways to care for each other. It demands that we align ourselves as 'citizens' to repressive, colonial governments and seeks to trap us into a constant game of negotiation with that which contains us, a process where the slightest incremental loosening is always followed by a greater tightening. More than the virus, its greatest terror is a collective desire that becomes un-tethered from government and begins to assert liberatory and autonomous self-organisation. Such ruptures begin to collapse the presumptive progressivism of linear time.

Outro: Collapsing linear time.

I occupy a present where time passes at the tenor of a slow murmur. A present before a future where nothing will be the same. Or where everything is more the same than ever. I know that you could tell me all the answers, but I've come to the sense that I don't need your shadow cast upon all that could be done now. I don't reject you because I am scared

of what may come. I am, but that's not the reason here. Instead, I acknowledge that things are simultaneously already bad enough and that they could always be worse. I also know that things have been bad enough for long before now – this land is permanently stained by the coloniser's drive to genocidal conquest.

I'm just a current version of many who've been worn out by the mythology of linear progressivism. That things will get better if we take certain steps. Or, even as everything breaks down, that if we retain fidelity to the 'rationality' of certain processes and rules, we might be able to just about hold on. From the heart of one of the countries most affected by the virus, Italian collective Wu Ming expose the lie of such propositions, asserting that the pandemic "presented a golden opportunity to restrict the spaces of freedom, settle accounts with unwelcome social movements... and restructure to the detriment of the weakest". But the logic of soon-to-come progress is pervasive in such a way that even some radicals cling to it. It hides in affirmations that have always been empty promises. The empty platitudes of 'freedom' and 'rights' belonging to the liberal individual. The arrogance of western democracy. The possessiveness and cruelty of the 'civilising' coloniser.

In *Re-thinking the Apocalypse: An Indigenous anti-futurist manifesto*, the authors write in our time of the pandemic, yet do not speak directly of it. They describe a "pathogenic global social order of imagined futures, built upon genocide, enslavement, ecocide, and total ruination" and refer to it as an "apocalyptic that colonizes our imaginations and destroys our past and future simultaneously. It is a struggle to dominate human meaning and all existence". They are not speaking directly to me – the 'our' they write for is crucially Indigenous – but there is an important resonance in recognising the colonisation of our imagination that becomes beholden to ideas of the future. Against this, they posit that "the anti-colonial imagination isn't a subjective reaction to colonial futurisms, it is anti-settler future. Our life cycles are not linear, our future exists without time. It is a dream, uncolonized."

As a settler, living on un-ceded Indigenous land, I cannot quite grasp or connect with the sense of non-linear time that they convey. But I can resist the timelines of settler futurity, the progressivism of the coloniser that tries to capture me within its narrative. I can look within any moment for it's potential to rupture those colonising narratives of progress, the promises of the future. And certainly the pandemic could hold that possibility. I follow Mantovani in *Coronavirus Beyond Coronavirus: thresholds, biopolitics and emergencies*, who sees how:

> "The social confinement of the quarantine, but also the empty or semi-deserted streets, the truncated markets, the confinement of the poorest to a strange slowed socio-economic precariousness, pave the way for us to other temporalities, other rhythms, other sociabilities, other appreciations and sensitivities."

I am seeking the liberatory potential of those 'other temporalities, other rhythms'. I am stuck on Nina Simone's haunting voice in *Mississippi Goddam* declaring, "I don't trust you anymore, you keep on saying 'go slow'". Her refusal of the logic invested in assuring us that steps are being taken, that everything ugly is a necessary point on the path to something beautiful. For me, the intensity of emotion her voice carries isn't about speeding up, instead it feels like the collapsing of every promise of time into that very moment. This isn't a suggestion for 'live in the moment' cliches, it's a call for a complete breakage from linear time, liberal progressivism and colonised futures. That we don't simply attempt to forge different paths while following the same logic.

But I'm not a robot programmed to block out any thoughts of what's to come. I do have preferences for how I'd like things to be. There are acts of intimacy, care and support, forms of mutual aid that we're trying to enact, that I would so much love to see spread and become part of the next thing. There are moments of exploration and learning, risk-taking and refusal, wildness and illegality – played out alongside friends and accomplices – that I can't help but imagine as continuing. These things are the very act of living, but they don't form an equation. The grander scale visions of ungovernable rebellion and restorative liberation are beyond the formalised social transactions of liberal consensus.

The pandemic is many unwelcome things. But it is also a rupture that shifts time. Liberal moralism and state power seek to re-capture time and order it into a linear progression that charts our containment within illusions of safety. Through the confusion, we must continue to find each other and become ok with the unknowable. Maybe I didn't need to write you all of this, maybe I should have just sent you these words by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney from *Politics Surrounded*:

"Administrators whisper of our need for institutions, and all institutions are political, and all politics is correctional, so it seems we need correctional institutions in the common, settling it, correcting us. But we won't stand corrected. Moreover, incorrect as we are there's nothing wrong with us. We don't want to be correct and we won't be corrected. Politics proposes to make us better, but we were good already in the mutual debt that can never be made good. We owe it to each other to falsify the institution, to make politics incorrect, to give the lie to our own determination. We owe each other the indeterminate. We owe each other everything."

List of texts.

(music)

Nina Simone, *Mississippi Goddam.*

Run the Jewels, new single *Ooh La La.*

(books)

Albert Camus, *The Plague.*

Jose Saramago, *Blindness.*

(articles/ essays)

Crimethinc, 'Terror Incognita' from: crimethinc.com

Emiliano Teran Mantovani, 'Coronavirus Beyond Coronavirus: thresholds, biopolitics and emergencies' found at: undisciplinedenvironments.org

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, 'Politics Surrounded' found in (book) *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study.*

Jackie Wang, 'Against Innocence' found at: www.sproutdistro.com

Matthew Sharpe, 'Guide to the Classics: Albert Camus, The Plague' from: www.theconversation.com

Natasha Lennard, 'After the Quarantine, the Flood'.*

Rene Riesel and Jaime Semprun, 'Catastrophism, disaster management and sustainable submission' found at: libcom.org/library

Wu Ming, 'The Funeral of Salvatore Ricciardi' from: illwilleditions.com

uncredited, 'Re-thinking the Apocalypse: An Indigenous anti-futurist manifesto' from: www.indigenousaction.org

*This article by Natasha Lennard was originally found at a once excellent online publication that ended due to failures in dealing with abuse and sexual assault by a member of the editorial collective. I have chosen not to link to that site.

** In the online version of the text re-produced in this zine there are further links to news articles reporting on some of the issues raised, eg policing, racism, etc. Found at: darknessoutside.home.blog